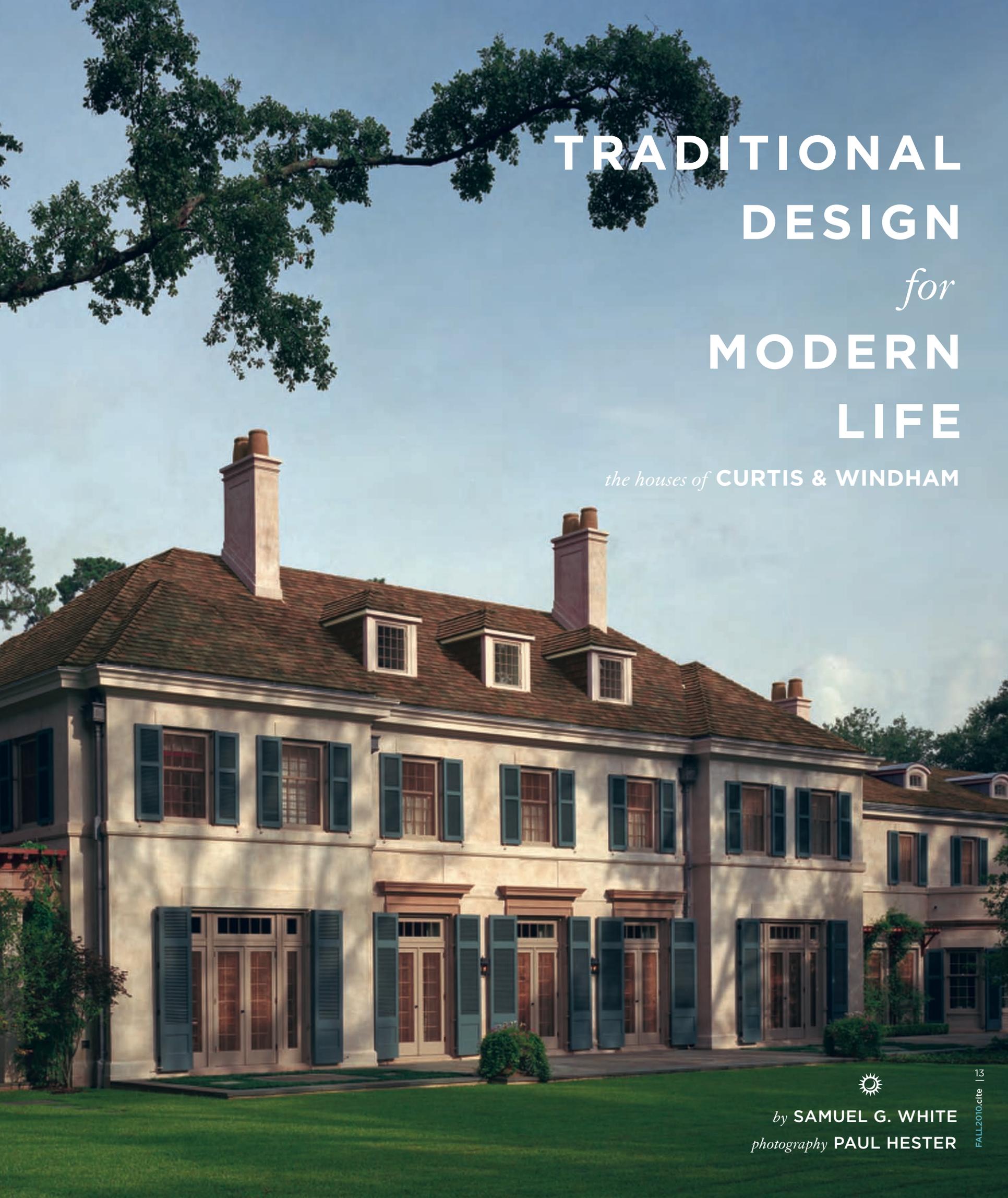


The single-family house is an American icon. From the seventeenth century up to the present, it represents the adaptation of a Western European typology to an American program in every respect of its design, from landscape to interior decoration.

Each era's interpretations have captured the spirit as well as the corroborative details of the period in which the house was conceived, particularly if its domestic agenda was an ambitious one. The needs of prosperous colonial merchants were quite different from those of mid-1920s Jay Gatsby, which in turn were very different from those of a two-career, three-child, multi-car household today. Yet all three could easily and comfortably live in houses that traced their lineage back to the villas of Andrea Palladio. Ambitious American country houses—from Robert E. Lee's Stratford Hall and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello in colonial Virginia to Frank Lloyd Wright's 1911 Taliesin in Wisconsin and Philip Johnson's 1949 Glass House in Connecticut—constitute an impressive legacy of residential design. American architects have always been judged by how well their houses reconcile contemporary requirements with that 300-year tradition. Our most revered architects, from Jefferson to Robert Venturi, were and are very good at it.





TRADITIONAL
DESIGN
for
MODERN
LIFE

the houses of CURTIS & WINDHAM



by SAMUEL G. WHITE
photography PAUL HESTER

Curtis & Windham

has created shingled retreats in Long Island, rustic hunting lodges in the Rockies, and beachside villas in Florida. Four of its best houses sit within blocks of each other in River Oaks. One is an homage to Charles Platt, the great twentieth-century architect of American country houses. The second owes much of its form and expression to the early work of Edwin Lutyens, the legendary architect whose collaborations with Gertrude Jekyll produced houses and gardens that in form, materials, and details were inseparable from the English landscape. The third, an extension to a 1920s house that was already 150 feet long, features an improbably linear and highly picturesque facade that defines the whole neighborhood. And the fourth wraps a modest two-story wall around an exterior court, a partially enclosed space that animates the public street while providing exceptional privacy to the home's occupants.

While the massing, elevations, and details of these houses are based on historical models with familiar imagery, the planning is wholly contemporary, and the effect is exceptionally pleasing. The firm is right here in Houston, but their houses are easy to miss (for all the best reasons), and most architects probably have never heard of them.

This is despite the fact that the architectural partnership has been in practice for almost 20 years, with a local, regional, and even national reputation for design excellence within their specialty. With 26 staff architects and three partners, Curtis & Windham is considered a mid-size office, which makes it larger than the vast majority of architecture firms. The principals are active in educational and professional affairs, and they design their buildings to make a contribution to the public realm as well. Their design process is one of extensive drawing and a nearly obsessive attention to detail, from materials and craftsmanship to portfolio presentations. Virtually all of their work comes through repeat clients, direct referrals, word of mouth, and people who get in touch with the architects after seeing their finished buildings.

Yet from certain perspectives, their practice is shrouded in a cloak of near invisibility. Client privacy precludes coverage in illustrated shelter magazines, while editorial or ideological purity keeps a more analytical discussion of their work off the pages of progressive architectural publications. Internet searches end at 50 websites without revealing a single picture of the firm's designs. Look in vain for prize-winning entries by Curtis & Windham in awards programs: they do not enter them because architectural juries favor designs inspired by "*Vers un*

Architecture" and ignore anything that demonstrates an appreciation for Paul Letarouilly and his masterly etchings of Renaissance Rome. Part of the problem is that Bill Curtis and Russell Windham are architects of traditional residences, and Houston is a modernist's town. The issue is then further compounded by the private nature of their clients, accomplished individuals of great discretion, many of whom sit on the boards of Houston's leading cultural and philanthropic groups.

If aspects of Curtis & Windham's anonymity are attributable to Houston, then the city must be given equal credit for their success, for Curtis & Windham's practice is very much a Houston phenomenon. Residential Houston developed as clusters of freestanding houses, the best among them erected in planned developments such as Broadacres, Shadyside, and River Oaks—neighborhoods convenient to downtown that allowed prosperous families to live surrounded by grass and trees. When it came to the architecture of their houses, they had no recognizable regional or vernacular tradition

supported by the enduring value of good real estate, the lack of significant housing alternatives, and a seemingly endless supply of cultivated, well-heeled clients who want to live in historic neighborhoods and who value traditional architecture. Ironically, the demand that fuels Curtis & Windham's local practice also benefits from Houston's lack of tough, enforceable landmark protection. While no firm is more scrupulous about respecting the city's architectural heritage, most of their commissions within Houston's city limits have required the demolition of existing—though insignificant—structures.

Successful architectural practices reflect circumstances as well as skill. Both Curtis and Windham arrived in Houston when its rich supply of traditional housing was becoming more widely appreciated, a moment that coincided with an emerging demand for new housing of the same high quality. They were prepared. Curtis, now 52, studied at the University of Texas at Austin and worked in San Antonio for two years before moving to



House 1 Entrance court—the porch is cast concrete, the walls are acid-washed stucco.

to turn to: no native Houston equivalent exists of the New England saltbox, the southwestern adobe compound, or the balconied facades of the New Orleans French Quarter. In Houston everything you see, from a federal revival drive-in bank to a prism-topped office tower, is completely made up. As long as the architecture respects, or at least compensates for, the realities of the hot and humid climate, it fits in. That is Houston's tradition.

It is a tradition that has produced a housing stock of exceptional quality and variety, the latter a result of the restrictive covenants of many of the planned developments, which required a mixture of styles. Beginning around 1905, great architects such as Harrie T. Lindeberg, Birdsall Briscoe, and John F. Staub designed beautiful houses in a wide range of traditional styles, all tailored to the needs of affluent Houston residents. Today that trend continues,

Washington, D.C., to work for Hartman-Cox, where for eight years he participated in one of the few major national practices that could reliably produce a literate classical building. A native of Texas, he moved to Houston in 1991 to set up a solo practice, showing a willingness to take any commission but also a fondness for traditional architecture. Windham, five years younger, studied at Texas Tech and spent five years in New England designing traditional residences. Already with a predisposition for traditional architecture, he experienced an epiphany during the nine months he worked in London for John Simpson, one of a handful of British architects who practice classical architecture as a religion, one requiring absolute faith and strict adherence to the Five Orders of columns. Windham moved to Houston the same year as Curtis to set up his own one-man office.

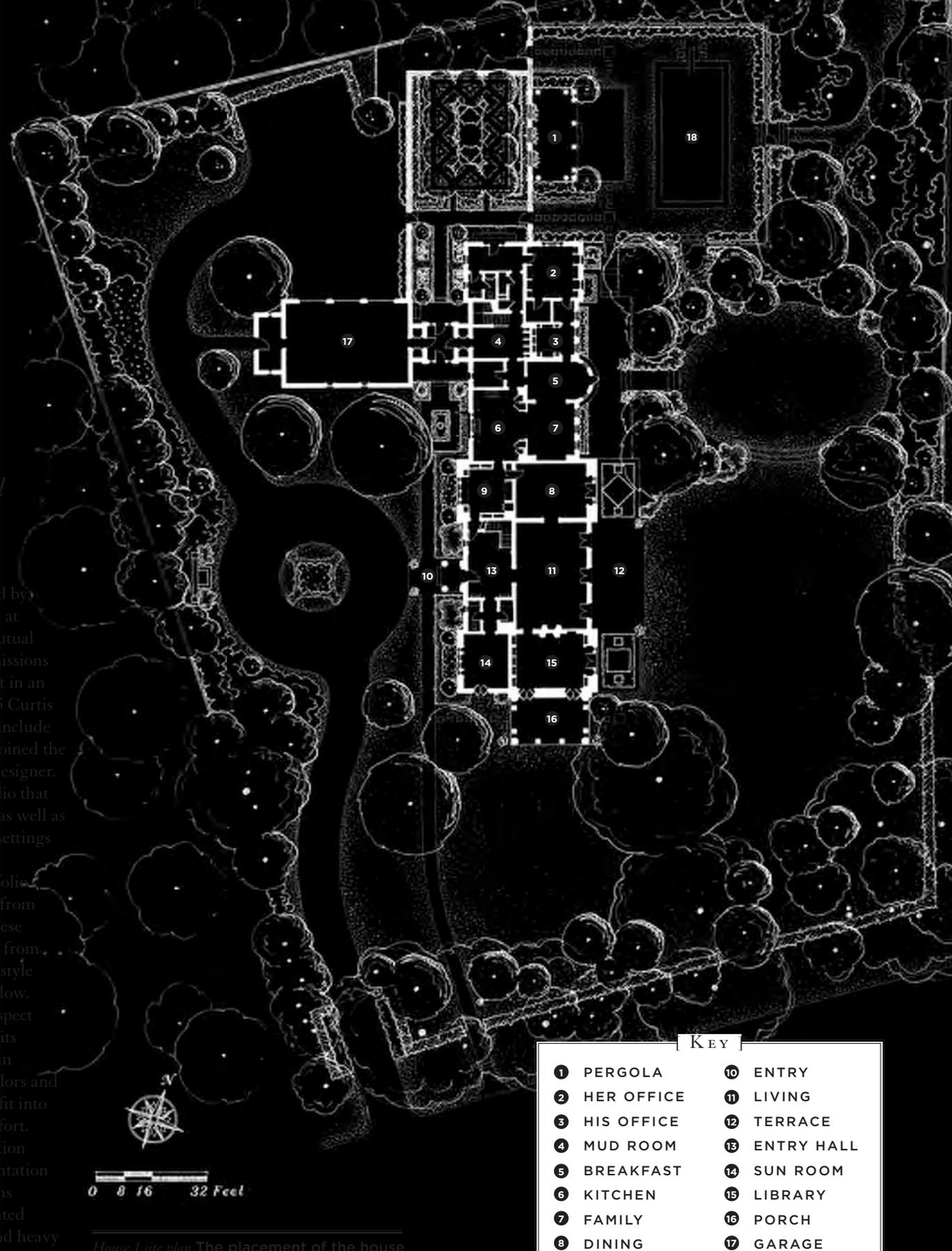


BECAUSE
Curtis & Windham
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A year later, in 1992, they were introduced by friends. Although neither had any real work at the time, the two agreed to combine their mutual interests and share office space. Three commissions arrived a week later, out of nowhere, the first in an 18-year streak of great opportunities. In 2005 Curtis and Windham expanded the partnership to include Harvard-trained Sarah Newbery, who had joined the office in 1999 as an architect and landscape designer. She now leads a seven-person landscape studio that has allowed the firm to diversify its practice as well as consolidate design control over the physical settings of their projects.

The heart of the Curtis & Windham portfolio consists of new freestanding houses ranging from 5,000 to 15,000 square feet. The facades of these houses illustrate a variety of familiar idioms, from English Tudor, American shingle, and high-style French to log cabin rustic and garden bungalow. The work has character: it is literate with respect to history, and it is consistently restrained in its expression to a degree that is almost unique in recent traditional houses. The selection of colors and materials appears inevitable, and the houses fit into the landscape without artifice or apparent effort. Architecture, landscape, and interior decoration are balanced and integrated, with no disorientation in the transition from the outdoors into rooms that might feature profiled cornices and painted ceilings or natural beadboard wainscoting and heavy timber trusses made from trees specially felled for the occasion. Each discipline takes a turn in the foreground with a strong figurative element—an entrance porch, a specimen tree, a memorable chandelier—before retreating to enrich the background with texture and detail.

Because Curtis & Windham creates environments that owe so much to precedent, their houses could be said to be more referential than inventive. Yet respect for history does not mean copying, and invention for its own sake is hardly a virtue in residential design. The familiar qualities of houses are what make them understandable, instantly and intuitively, and Curtis



House 1 site plan. The placement of the house causes the edges of the property to melt into the generous landscaping.

KEY

- | | |
|--------------|---------------|
| 1 PERGOLA | 10 ENTRY |
| 2 HER OFFICE | 11 LIVING |
| 3 HIS OFFICE | 12 TERRACE |
| 4 MUD ROOM | 13 ENTRY HALL |
| 5 BREAKFAST | 14 SUN ROOM |
| 6 KITCHEN | 15 LIBRARY |
| 7 FAMILY | 16 PORCH |
| 8 DINING | 17 GARAGE |
| 9 DISH ROOM | 18 POOL |

& Windham’s houses manage to be both suitably generic and highly tailored at the same time. A full appreciation of their designs reveals them as original works of architecture.

While each house is different, they all emerge from the same rigorous process. A project begins with the parallel analyses of program, site, and client. While the first two follow a predictable and neutral course, the analysis of the client is both freeform

and intense. Curtis and Windham have to figure out what the client (who has asked, say, for “an American house” and “something permanent”) really wants. This investigation typically involves multiple sessions with the client reviewing the history of architecture, painting, and decorative arts, visits to other houses and museums, and even field trips to Europe. On one expedition both client and architect looked hard at eighteenth-century French architecture to



THEIR DESIGNS MAY BE DEEPLY INFORMED *by* HISTORY, BUT THEY MUST MEET THE REQUIREMENTS *of* MODERN FAMILIES.



House 2 Entrance court; family room; living room. The interiors fulfill the expectations created by the elevations.

understand how it worked—from the massing and proportions to the window reveals and downspout details, a level of knowledge that was imperative before they could translate the eighteenth century French model from its original setting, design, and construction to a contemporary program built with available materials and set in Houston. A trip to England with another client was organized around visits to Robert Adam houses in order to understand the underlying structure of Adam’s large formal rooms—grand spaces that could handle lots of guests but which never lost a sense of intimate, human scale. The design that came from this visit was not an Adam copy in any respect, but it was a room based on Adam’s approach to spatial hierarchies and subdivisions.

Layers of preconceptions have to be peeled away to understand who the client is, and what he or she likes and why. The architects focus on primary sources—and not just the sources themselves, but the context that created those sources. If a client expresses an interest in Edwin Lutyens, they investigate what Lutyens was looking at and not just what he did with it. As the architects dig deeper into history, the client’s original requirements begin to evolve. Thus the description “American” might turn out to have a variety of meanings, with different implications

for the dimensions, arrangement, and spirit of the design. The result of this exploration is a deeper level of understanding of the client, which translates into a richer and more layered knowledge of history.

Throughout this exercise the designers never lose sight of the fact that these are contemporary houses. Their designs may be deeply informed by history, but they must meet the requirements of modern families. Floor plans are remarkably efficient, particularly with respect to circulation space. This is especially the case around the entrance: living rooms are close to the front door. Service spaces reflect actual use—i.e., sometimes dinner may be served by others, and sometimes everyone will eat in the kitchen. Most of the houses are only one or one-and-a-half rooms deep, a concession to Houston's environment (and a characteristic of the best designs of Staub and his contemporaries). The houses are grand, but they are also contemporary.

Each of the four houses in River Oaks reveals a different aspect of the architects' skill. The Platt-inspired house is sited on a corner lot. The main block, which is rotated 90 degrees from the expected siting, has been pushed to the rear so that the entrance court and backyard are compressed into tightly framed spaces, while the driveway and front lawn are exceptionally generous. These strategies, combined with carefully placed axes, allow the house to borrow unused space from its neighbors so that the property seems to be much larger than it is. As a result, the design does not suffer from the all too common fate of an oversized house on an undersized lot. The massing is restrained, with a main block, subordinate dependencies, hyphens, and a low-pitched hip roof. The five-bay main block is articulated as a shallow "H" with an emphasis on the proportion of window to wall, the rhythm of solids and voids, and the judicious placement of ornamental relief.

The wall materials are equally subtle—a stucco coating of raw, untinted mortar that has been acid-washed to expose a matrix of warm brown torpedo sand. Columns, entablatures, and other figurative elements are cast concrete. The impression created by these humble materials is one of controlled understatement. The roof is shingled in flat terracotta tiles salvaged from an institution in Alabama. The window sashes and frames are painted to match the walls. Shutters, with close attention to the proportions of frame and louver, are painted teal blue. At the bottom of the facade, the plane of the wall ends in a projecting baseboard—also rendered in sandy concrete. It is an unusual detail that helps the building meet the ground, as well as a deliberate reference to Bayou Bend, designed by Staub, an architect whom Curtis and Windham admire almost without qualification.

The evocative spirit of Platt's architecture is legible in the house's massing, its materials, and most particularly the fenestration; however, inside the front door Platt's processional spaces and suites of formal rooms have here been replaced by directness, a hint of informality, and interesting ambiguities. It

takes four steps to cross the entrance hall and enter the largest room in the house. A small sitting room off the hall invites encounters that would benefit from its intimate dimensions and lively, faux-painted tile floor. The landing at the top of the stairs has been enlarged, transforming the typical upstairs hall into an unexpected family room. All spaces are well proportioned. Molding profiles have been adapted to express their situation; for example the profile of the upstairs door casings is derived from those used downstairs, but simplified to reflect the more informal setting of the bedroom floor. Impeccable craftsmanship, serious architecture, and respect for historical traditions form worthy backdrops for the spirited interior design.

The other River Oaks houses achieve similar results through completely different means. The Lutyens-inspired house consists of a central stone block in rough-faced ashlar with limestone details. The massing is broken down and animated by picturesque projections rendered in natural wood: first-growth cypress from the depths of Alabama swamps that has been milled into siding, windows, and trim. Spaces inside range from baronial-scaled rooms with trusses of mammoth cypress logs to a modest circular dining room with glazed



House 3 An array of garages and service yards are concealed behind the extension, which is visible on the left.

walls and a plaster garland of bay leaves on the ceiling. Surrounded by the rapacious flora of River Oaks, the house appears to be a natural outgrowth of its site. A rambling series of gables forms a perimeter of well-proportioned outdoor spaces, from entry and service courts to lawns and gardens. A gate off the pool leads to a flight of stone steps that is swallowed by vegetation as it descends to the bayou.

The third Curtis & Windham house in this quadrant of River Oaks was originally designed by Frank Forster, an early twentieth-century architect with a national practice of designing country houses in highly picturesque idioms. The program for expansion addressed the way the original house seemed to be adrift on its site, disconnected from the street and forming no natural divisions for outdoor activities. To preserve the hierarchies of Forster's design, the architects dismantled certain original features and reassembled them at the end of the newly extended house. Forster had used modular and clinker bricks, laid up wildly out of plumb, to reinforce the medieval image, and the use of similar materials (and exceptional craftsmanship) makes the extension indistinguishable from the original. The project added only a modest amount of space to the interior, but it resolved a large number of problems with the site by creating natural locations for lawns, pool houses, kitchen gardens, and garages. New driveways reconnected the building to its site by organizing the more publicly visible space between house and street.

The fourth and last house of the Curtis & Windham group is the most modest and in many respects the most ingenious. Small enough to be manageable by two people and large enough for formal entertaining, it also meets the clients' unusual request for a house that provided exterior views of itself from within. The firm's analysis of the program (an empty-nester residence), the site (a corner lot in a densely settled neighborhood), and the client (adventurous, widely traveled, and well read) led to the choice of a Spanish

colonial atrium scheme by way of California. Incorporating a weathered terra-cotta tile roof salvaged from a construction site in Mexico, the house features three different colors for window frames, sashes, and shutters; hand-forged ironwork at the gates and balconies; and attractive garage doors. All aspects of the design, from the compact massing and tactile materials to the subtleties of color and detail, work together effortlessly and to great effect.

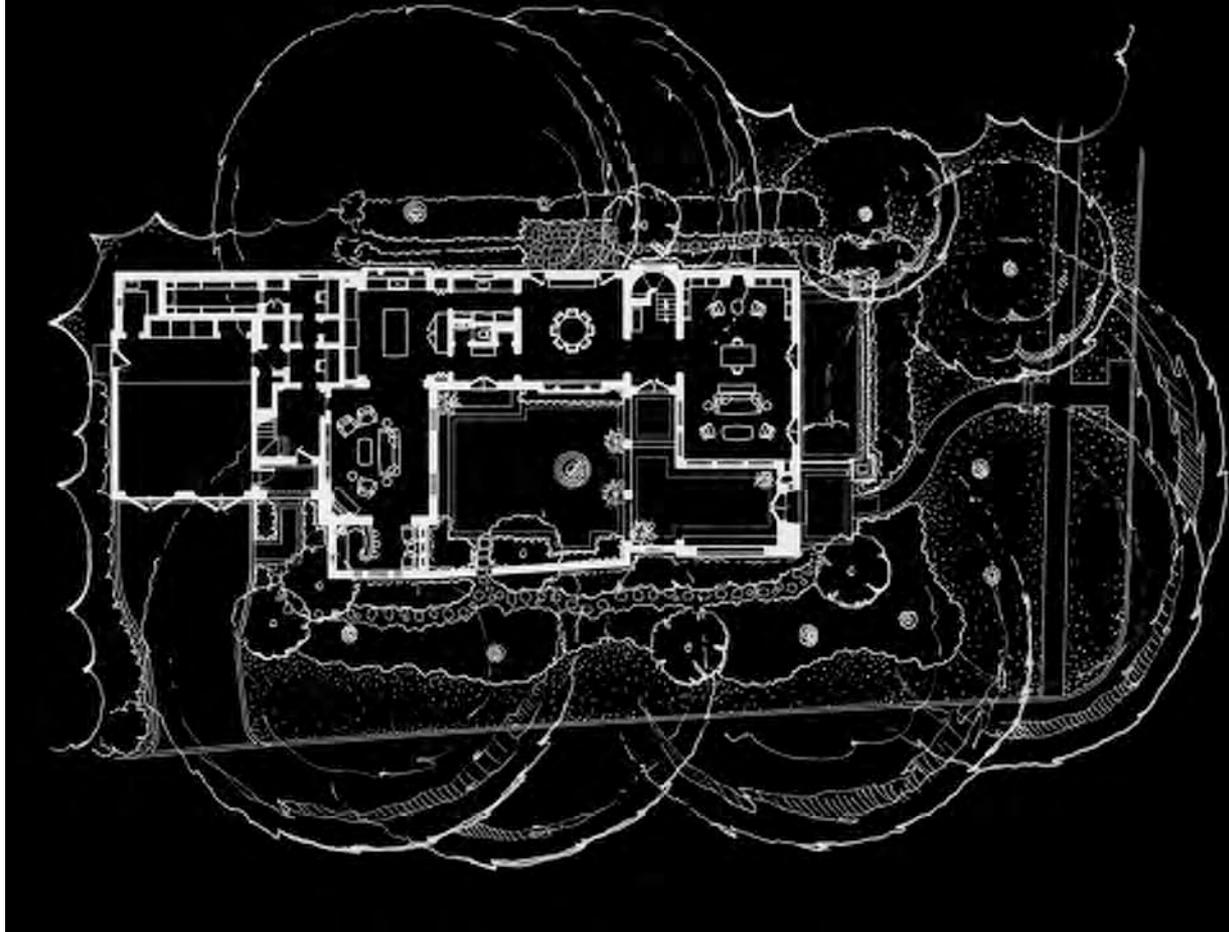
The house's central aspect is a courtyard with a bubbling fountain, framed by three walls, each façade carefully elevated and subtly differentiated to maintain a comfortable scale in the outdoor space. The fourth wall is open, providing generous views from house and garden to the street, at the same time affording far more open space than the dimensions of the lot would suggest. Privacy is maintained by layers of plants plus careful adjustments to the heights of walls and the placement of openings.

While not apparent from the street, the zoning inside is strong and clear, as each leg of the U-shaped plan is given over to a major program element. A continuous and carefully articulated space housing the kitchen, family room, and a small bar is contained in the wing separating the courtyard from the garage. The middle section encloses the entry, stair hall, and dining room. The single space that comprises the third section is simultaneously simple and complex, suggesting an intimate library at one end and a generous living room in the middle, while what at first appears to be a glazed solarium at the far end turns out to be a wall of windows. These extend from ceiling to floor, borrowing space, light, and views from the covered entrance, a processional route that begins at the front gate, passes through the house, and wraps around the living room via an arcade that frames views of the courtyard and kitchen wing before arriving at the front door. The directness of the plan is reinforced by the simplicity of the details. Thick, flat, dark-stained boards frame the jambs of major openings without casings. Plain plaster walls are unrelieved by baseboards, allowing beamed ceilings to dominate the texture and scale of the interior architecture. Upstairs the three-part articulation of the mass translates into private suites for master bedroom and guests at opposite ends of the house. Two bedrooms in the center wing, evidently for visiting grandchildren, are the only major spaces that do not have three exposures to light or views across the courtyard of the exterior. It is a remarkably subtle design and an extremely comfortable house.

There are a number of firms in Houston and around the country that specialize in the design of large, expensive, traditional houses. It might appear that these practices have a lot in common, beginning with their commitment to 2,000 years of architectural history. Their offices are stocked with rare and out-of-print monographs on the works of past masters as well as seductive samples of exotic materials and fragments of intricate, hand-carved ornament. In their drafting rooms one encounters graduates of Notre Dame's School of Architecture, the only program in America that is based on traditional architectural principles and Beaux Arts-based presentation techniques. These firms all jealously protect their sources—wood carvers, blacksmiths,



House 4 Second and first floor plans. The circulation, informal downstairs and formal upstairs, wraps around the central courtyard.



PRIVACY *is maintained by* **LAYERS OF PLANTS PLUS CAREFUL ADJUSTMENTS to the HEIGHTS OF WALLS AND THE PLACEMENT of OPENINGS.**



ornamental plasterers, flooring contractors, faux-bois painters, manufacturers of custom hardware and light fixtures, each of whom embodies some centuries-old artisanal tradition and operates at a stratospheric level of craftsmanship.

While Curtis & Windham is among the best of these architectural firms, there is a significant and important difference between their work and that of some others. Bill Curtis and Russell Windham see history and tradition as a guide that establishes rigorous, internal rules for design, not a sourcebook for images to pluck from across the spectrum and apply as fancy strikes. Those rules apply to the client as well as to the architect, and they need to be enforced if the goal is to create good architecture. One cannot imagine a Curtis & Windham house in which the integrity of the design has been ruined by a self-indulgent program element, any more than one can imagine a Curtis & Windham house marred by a gratuitous or exaggerated design

House 4—clockwise from left Courtyard; dining room; street view; and kitchen.



feature. The combination of seriousness, restraint, and discipline in their work stands in juxtaposition to the postmodern excesses that give traditional architecture a bad name. In this respect Curtis & Windham is no different from architects known for more contemporary idioms. They demand the same level of commitment from their clients, they use the same analytical methodology to generate their schemes, and they develop specific vocabularies of forms, materials, and details that are fitted to each project, a vocabulary in which every single part is considered in the context of the whole design. The final image of a Curtis & Windham house may be traditional and the effect may be familiar, but Bill Curtis and Russell Windham come by their decisions honestly, and their work is serious architecture. 🏠

